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ABSTRACT

This study is an examination of the interactional language of a teacher from United States mainstream culture and three male students, one each from Appalachian culture, black inner-city culture, and mainstream culture, during first grade literacy instruction. In this cultures-in-contact situation provided in an urban school in the northeastern United States, language data were collected through the use of video tapes, audio tapes, and note-taking in the classroom, sampling from a six month period from the start of the school year until shortly after the beginning of the second major grading period. Additional data were collected via teacher and student interviews and independent measures of literacy development. Analysis of teacher and student interactional language using discourse analysis frameworks advanced by Sinclair and Coulthard and Mehan reveal language use rules, both taught and learned, for behavior and academic achievement. These data also reveal the subjects' relative success in functionally operating within those rules. Functional match or mismatch of the taught and learned categories of rules appears to be related to teacher assessment of the students' competency in the classroom and students' success in becoming literate. (Author)

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Discourse Rules Taught To and Learned By Culturally Diverse Children During Literacy Instruction

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Running Head: Discourse Rules

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A recurrent complaint one often hears from adult members of our society is that our children aren't learning basic skills, such as reading and writing. To counteract this lament, which is often as simplistic as it is ill-informed, elementary schools throughout the land have instituted programs of "literacy learning," in which first-graders are to be taught how to read. At the same time, administrators and teachers have been made increasingly aware of problems in teaching children who, within the same classroom, exhibit dissimilar backgrounds of language and culture. Recognition of such diversity also invites the development of alternative methods for coping with it, as Hymes suggests, exemplifying the challenge of as much as the difficulty in providing students with equal "access to (different) kinds of competence" (Hymes, 1979).

For instance, Blacks of the inner city and urbanized Appalachians represent cultures that are essentially and by tradition oral in character. Members of these cultures are likely to have achieved far lower levels of literacy than persons from the cultural mainstream. In consequence, their children are likely to have come from homes in which there is much greater reliance upon the spoken than the written word as a mode of communicating and being communicated with (Labov, 1977; Montgomery, 1977; Stewart, 1974).

To investigate what can happen under these circumstances, we selected for study a group of first-graders and their teacher in an elementary school within the public school system of a large midwestern city. When our research began last Fall, the system had just been reorganized under a court-ordered plan of desegregation. And so, for the first time, the classroom included white children from the cultural mainstream, bussed in from an adjacent neighborhood.

Because male students in general seem to have more trouble than females in learning to be literate, we chose for intensive observation and analysis three boys: one from the black culture of the inner city, a second from Appalachian culture, and the third a white child from the cultural mainstream. Along with these boys, we centered attention on their teacher, a white, middle-class female with six years teaching experience in the site school.

Three periods of observation were used: one over 4 days in the fourth week of September, 1979, a second for 3 days in the second week of November, 1979, and the third over 3 days in the first week of February, 1980 -- also the first week of the second semester. Records were collected in the form of video- and audiotapes, note-taking by at least one of us during classtime, notes on interviews with the teacher containing her evaluations of the students' progress, interviews with the individual students and an independent measure: Marie Clay's (1972) Concepts About Print Survey.

Unfortunately, time limits imposed upon us in this symposium prevent us from offering more than a sketchy report on data analyzed to date. Although several methods of analysis are being employed, we shall limit our presentation here to information yielded by recourse to the frameworks of Mehan (1979) and Sinclair and Coulthard (1975). We have focused upon these children's "communicative competence": their ability to use language in the classroom and to do so appropriately (DeStefano, 1978).

In this classroom of first-graders, as in many others, much of the school day is devoted to literacy instruction, to which a major portion of academic activity is devoted during the school day in that first year.

The teacher seems to be guided by two kinds of objectives for learning by her students: (a) to be orderly in their behavior and (b) to become proficient in their reading. How well they perform in these areas seems to be the basis on which the teacher assesses their relative competence as members of the classroom community (Mehan, 1979). Elsewhere we have described more fully the modes in which the two forms of competence are taught and learned: that is, as procedural and substantive rules (DeStefano, Pepinsky, and Sanders, 1980).

Notable among the procedural rules that determine orderliness are those of turn-taking, which the teacher elicits and responds to during a period of literacy instruction. For the most part, it is she who allocates and monitors the taking of these turns, as part of the teacher's documented role (McHoul, 1979; Mehan, 1979). Following Sinclair and Coulthard (1975), we have noted that she tends first to ask a question, then to indicate by calling a child's name or by a nonverbal gesture, whose turn it is to answer "one-speaker-at-a-time" (Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson, 1974). Within a reading group, the raising of hands by the students also indicates to her who is paying attention.

The allocation of turns further serves instructional ends, as when children are nominated to read aloud or to answer questions subsequent to their reading of a story. Care is taken to insure that each child within the reading group does these things at least once during a lesson. Still other turns are allocated to children for the purpose of checking on their academic progress as readers.

Other rules of discourse may be inferred. For example, the teacher evidently attaches importance to the decoding of words. When students are reading

silently, they bid to the teacher for help in decoding single words. Questions about a story or even a single sentence are not asked. The teacher's usual response is to help the students with the initial sound of a word. Within Sinclair and Coulthard's (1975) analytic framework, she does this by means of directives, clues, and informative acts. Figure 1 of your handout shows a typical exchange during a time of silent reading. When the students in this class read aloud, they also read word by word, giving each the intonation of a sentence: e.g., "This↘. . .is↘. . .where↘. . . we↘. . .want↘. . .to↘. . .go↘."

Figure 1 goes about here

How well the three students in our study have learned the substantive and procedural rules involved in learning to be literate can only be answered in preliminary fashion at this time. Apparently, though, the students have accommodated. For example, while the middle-class boy makes bids, such as "Can I tell you two things?" -- at times without raising his hand, the other two do neither of these things. The Appalachian youngster, who bids less, usually does so to ask about some procedural rule. The Black youngster makes bids least of all for response by the teacher.

In terms of substantive rules for becoming literate, the boys appear to be adept at learning the appropriate rules. They elicit response from the teacher by such remarks as "I'm stuck on. . .," obtaining from her a directive in the form of "Make the _____sound," which they seem equally capable of doing.

However, there are observed differences. The Black child from the inner city, who is also in the lowest of four reading groups, asks less often for

any type of assistance than the other two. As indicated in Figure 2, though, the Appalachian, who does elicit such help, demonstrates ability to have a word almost totally segmented into its constituent sounds and then to resynthesize it. By comparison with the mainstream youngster, he tends to make fewer bids for help such as "I'm stuck on. . ." As illustrated in Figure 3, the mainstream youngster most often recognizes the "correct" word when given no more than an initial sound or a clarification.

Figures 2 and 3 go about here

By recourse to Mehan's (1979) mode of analysis, we could determine that the teacher uses the students' bids for help as evidence that they are, in fact, reading silently when asked to do so. The middle-class child often resorts to this kind of feedback. To a lesser degree, so does the Appalachian, but at the same time, he indicates that decoding is giving him trouble. This is important because he is a repeater in first grade, although he did not previously have the same reading series to work with. The Black child provides the teacher with but little feedback of this kind.

As an overt sign of the teacher's assessment of their relative success as readers, the students have been assigned to one of four reading groups, after having participated at the beginning of the year in general classroom reading readiness instruction. By November, 1979, the mainstream and Appalachian students were in the middle reading group, known as "The Tigers" after the book they were reading. The child of the Black inner city culture was in the bottom group which had no name because they did not read from a text but rather worked on dittoed exercises and with flashcards. Groups were called by the teacher always in order from most to least advanced.

By February,1980, the teacher had formally evaluated the children's progress in reading. The child from the cultural mainstream had received a designation of "satisfactory progress" on his report card, and he had also successfully completed a reading series criterion referenced test of progress in reading. However, while he is progressing at an acceptable rate, in her estimation, she did report that "he did not really try hard." During the second data collection period he was volunteering, attending, and responding less than in earlier periods of observation. Further, his stanine score on Clay's (1972) inventory remained the same from September, 1979, to February,1980. His teacher reports he is not in danger of failing.

Though he is still in the middle reading group and received "satisfactory progress" on his report card, the Appalachian child isn't doing well according to his teacher. Because of noted frequent and sustained absences, she has placed him additionally in the bottom reading group and has him working outside of class with a reading specialist. When asked what reading group he's in, he alludes only to his placement in the middle group. He does continue to volunteer frequently in his two reading groups and has passed the criterion referenced reading series test. On Clay's (1972) inventory, his stanine score likewise has not changed from September,1979, to February,1980. In general, he continues to be interested in becoming more literate. His teacher reports that, since he is repeating the first grade, he cannot again be failed.

The inner-city Black child, seems to continue being enthusiastic about becoming literate and to have awareness of his growth in this respect, even though, on his report card he received a "needs improvement" evaluation from the teacher. On Clay's (1972) inventory, he has moved from the fourth to the fifth stanine over the six month period. He also seems to be cognizant of

areas that are troublesome for him. His bottom group, for some reason, was not administered the reading test, so there is no measure of his progress on that instrument. Though the teacher expresses concern about his progress, she thinks he will "pull through" first grade.

As implied earlier, our evidence suggests that these children are assessed in terms of their orderliness in procedure along with their substantive progress toward literacy. If satisfactory in these respects, a child "passes" to the second grade. Analysis of language data from the final period of data collection in February reveals the teacher to be rewarding both orderliness and literacy by such remarks as, "Look how quietly Jane is working. She is showing me that she really knows how to be a second grader." If judged less than competent on either criterion, the child may have to repeat the first grade. In ways that we are currently identifying and explicating, children do receive daily signals about their relative levels of accomplishment. Our three case studies of culturally diverse children and their teacher in a classroom of first graders are yielding this and other provocative information about a complex process of interaction in the classroom.

Much remains to be done. As suggested in this brief sketch of what is emerging in our research, however, we are reaping a rich harvest of questions for us and for others to ponder. As elaborated upon elsewhere (DeStefano, Pepinsky, and Sanders, 1980), there are issues to be identified and, when possible, to be resolved. For example, we may ask about the kinds of social influence that the teacher -- as agent -- seems to be exercising differentially upon students --as objects -- in her classroom, and what kinds of policy are explicitly or implicitly reflected in her actions. Again, we may ask what kinds of responses she elicits in turn from her students -- as objects -- of

her behavior toward them. Appended is the question of explicit or implicit policies reflected in their actions toward her and toward each other. The vocabulary and rules that we are beginning to construct out of our data analysis point toward a grammar of social actions appropriate to the classroom. A schema for collecting and organizing that kind of information is also exhibited and discussed elsewhere (DeStefano et al., 1980).

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Figure 1

Exchange between Teacher and Student during a Period of Silent Reading
(after Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975)

Exchange Type	Opening	Act	Answering	Act	Follow-up	Act
P-Elicit	P NV - raised hand	bid				
	T NV - nod of head by teacher	nomination				
	P - I'm stuck on... this word.	elicitation (information)				
			T - O.k., read the whole sentence.	acknowledgement directive		
			P - Go...in... where...you... --	reply		
			T - "Blank"	clue		
			T - "W". Make the "w" sound, "w". Make it with me. I'm doing it with yuh. "W-, w-, w-."	clue directive clue (informative)		
			P - "W-"...want.	reply		
					T - There, you've got it. If you must make those letter sounds, you'll <u>hear</u> it.	evaluate + comment

Figure 2

Teacher's Prompting of Appalachian Student

Student:	I'm stuck on n-o-t.
Teacher:	Make the 'n' sound.
Student:	"en."
Teacher:	No, 'n', 'n'.
Student:	"nen."
Teacher:	Make just the 'n'. Let's hear it.
Student:	"N."
Teacher:	Now 't' sound. 'N', 't'.
Student:	"Not."

Figure 3

Mainstream Student's Bid and Teacher's Response

Student: I don't know what that first word is.

Teacher: (spelling for clarification) H-e-r-e?

Student: "Here."